New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 13, 1957*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Greatest Man Alive"

Daily Mirror

May 9, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

Even the Experts Can Be Wrong

The experts can be wrong And how! Take scenic designer Frederick Fox, actors-authors-directors-producers Elliott Nugent and John Gerstad, for instance. These Main Stem magnificos have given us a lot of top-flight theatre in their time. But they're human, like the rest of us.

When they make a mistake, it's a beaut. Like teaming to offer Tony Webster's "The Greatest Man Alive!" at the Ethel Barrymore Wednesday evening. Webster, by the way, is no midget in the entertainment world either, having devised gags and business for such aristocrats of the airwaves as Bob and Ray, Sid Caesar and Phil Silvers.

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SO DON'T FEEL too badly if you've been talked into backing a slow horse on a fast track now and then. A script is a tough thing to judge in cold type. It may read funny, and seem as dull on a stage as a miser's dime, tarnished from lack of use. When big shots like Fox, Nugent and Gerstad can miss the boat, so can you.

"The Greatest Man Alive!" probably struck this trio as being hilarious, and so it is about once every half hour. The Webster wisecracks explode with a bang when they do explode. But for the better part of an evening, the new arrival is damp comedy fireworks.

It's about Amos Benedict, a failure at 72, who determines to hang himself in a derby hat to make the headlines for once in his life. As a youth, he sets out to decide whether to become a doctor or a lawyer, and awakens from his dream at 65, a second-rate carpenter. And then settles for a job delivering trivial messages to important people.

In three acts, Amos never succeeds in knocking himself off. But he does annoy the devil out of the Police Department and the psychiatrists at Bellevue. However, the old windbag does do one good deed. He persuades a sympathetic femme surveyor for a breakfast food company to ditch an efficient stuffed shirt for a likeable law student.

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THE BEST THING about "The Greatest Man Alive!" is Dennis King's beguiling performance as the eccentric Amos, though a fellow first-nighter declared out loud that it was the curtain's final fall that delighted him. Amazingly versatile and gifted, King can make the veriest dross gleam like the real stuff from Fort Knox.

"THE GREATEST MAN ALIVE"

Play in three acts by Tony Webster; staged by Elliott Nugent; production designed and lighted by Frederick Fox; presented by Mr. Fox in association with Mr. Nugent and John Gerstad at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, May 8, 1957. The cast:

Amos Benedict.....Dennis King
Tom Hopkins....Russell Collins
Peggy Thomas..Kathleen Maguire
Harry Dugan.....Richard Kelly
Steve Boyle.....Biff McGuire
Policeman.....Joseph Boland
Bishop Hansen.....John Gibson
Ambulance Driver..Edgar Meyer
Hospital Aid....William Windom
Photographer.....Stephen Gray

Russell Collins, another excellent trouper; pretty Kathleen Maguire, Biff McGuire and Richard Kelly made the most of their opportunities under Nugent's able staging. As for Fox, he has designed a wonderfully dreary flat in a Manhattan flea-bag.

Webster has chosen an interesting and yet a dangerous title for his feeble farce. Other wags might be tempted, under the dubious spell he has cast, to observe: "Alive? My stethoscope says no!" Corny, yes, but the provocation is there.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 9, 1957

A Promising Idea Gets Lost

Dennis King Emerges Triumphant

By TOM DONNELLY.

Tony Webster's comedy, "The Greatest Man Alive" (at the Ethel Barrymore), touches on the surface of human feelings and frustrations that are universal, but it is never sharp enough to cut through to where the bone is.

Amos Benedict, 72, is tired of laboring in pointless obscurity as a messenger boy. He wants to become famous. He decides that if he hangs himself while wearing a derby hat he will be bound to crash the newspapers. As the play begins, Amos enters his shabby walk-up jauntily humming "Camptown Races,"

stands on a chair, adjusts the noose, remembers that he has forgotten to check the spelling of a word in his suicide note, checks it, corrects it, and is just about ready to jump when the old codger who lives next door pops in to find out if Amos would like to take a stroll to the library.

Amos wouldn't, and he is annoyed when his friend prepares to leave without asking any of the obvious questions. Amos explains his theory that the derby hat will distinguish his suicide from the routine deaths of hundreds of others pursuing the noose, poison and gas routes. Amos' friend is enchanted with such originality, and immediately decides to commit suicide too. Amos is again annoyed. He doesn't want anybody crabbing his last act.

Before very long a lot of people are interested in Amos. A girl who is making a test among consumers as to the relative merits of two cereals wanders into the flat, sees the noose, hears Amos recite his grand plan, and is moved to horror and pity. The police surround the place. Amos calls up the TV people, and they send cameras. (By this time the world believes that Amos is holding the girl against her will, at the point of a gun.)

Thrilled by Notoriety.

Amos is thrilled with his notoriety, though he is somewhat crushed to hear a child in the street below deflatingly refer to him as a crazy old man, and invite him to do away with himself immediately.

As you may judge, playwright Webster is not working in a worn groove. His approach is freshly sardonic, and he has contrived a generous assortment of amusing bits and pieces. But this is the sort of material that falls or stands on markedly superior execution. The dynamic force needed to strike the spark of conviction is simply not there. "The Greatest Man Alive" starts and stops, starts and stops.

Too much of the play is given over to the commonplace. (The visiting young lady discards a pompous fiance in favor of the blunt, lively lad who invariably turns up to rescue young ladies afflicted with pompous fiance.)

A cleric described as a "TV bishop" arrives on the scene to speak words of positive buttery inspiration to the hapless Amos. Mr. Webster misses a chance for some telling humorous observation here. The cleric is a feeble caricature, and the

episode slides away into the void.

Droll Things.

Amos says a lot of droll things, but he lacks eloquence when it comes to what really matters. When he says, "Everybody wants to be famous" he does not sound like a lonely man desperate to catch at the coattails of a hurrying, indifferent world. He sounds like a man who simply and vulgarly wants to be famous.

And when Mr. Webster has Amos indulge in a second suicide attempt, his hands busy with Fourth of July sparklers, a brassy military march on the victrola, and his friend blowing taps on a bugle, the bottom falls out of the business. This scene does not suggest that Amos is really crazy, or really in despair, or a creature of controlled whimsy. It simply suggests that Mr. Webster has decided that the time has come for another sight gag, and it hopelessly obscures what would seem to have been the clear point of a shaky but inherently honest small-scale play.

Through thick and thin, Dennis King gives a wonderfully stylish performance as Amos: wry, light, and filled with a pathetic grandeur. Russell Collins is fine as his doddering friend, and Kathleen Maguire and Biff McGuire handle the romantic interludes attractively.

The New York Times

May 9, 1957

Theatre: Dennis King

He Likes to Act—Even in 'Greatest Man'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

PROBABLY Dennis King likes to act. That seems to be the only way to account for his presence in a feeble jest like "The Greatest Man Alive!" which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening.

If he likes to act, there will be no objections offered here. For he is a rattling good actor who knows everything about the business and also has a sense of humor. In Tony Webster's comedy he plays the part of a seedy old man who decides to become famous by hanging himself with a derby hat on his head.

This is not the gayest idea in the world for a Maytime laugh festival. But let us concede that and go on to Mr. King. He plays the part with skill, imagination and gusto. He has worked it up into a little gem of character comedy.

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In the first place, he has costumed it perfectly. He wears a battered two-piece suit that was probably second-hand when it was new. The fit is not bad: it is merely impromptu. It is years since the old man has given any thought to clothes that fit. In the second place, Mr. King walks with a totter that is nevertheless jaunty. The man may be old, but he does not feel his age.

When the old man gets ready to hang himself in the first scene, Mr. King has thought of innumerable irrelevant details—a contented hum while he is knotting the rope, a pause for reflection, an approving glance into the mirror, a touch of the breast-pocket handkerchief to make sure that the tip is properly visible, fastidious attention to the angle of the hard hat.

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So it goes through the length of this meandering comedy. Mr. King has polished the details without calling attention to them. Everything he contributes out of his enthusiasm for acting is absorbed into the performance. Mr. King is also the master of the pause, the inflection, the slight movement or the gleam that give significance to a line. The lines seem fresh as he reads them. For he always has the audience in his hand.

"The Greatest Man Alive!" contains material enough for a fifteen-minute sketch or a half-hour television show. But Mr. Webster goes on putting one line after another until it is time to let the audience go home. His writing is flat. It has none of the interior movement of theatre writing.

Since Mr. King is on the premises until the final curtain, it is obvious that the old man does not hang himself in the first scene, nor in the last act when he sets about the chore again—this time with two sparklers in his hands and the phonograph blaring a military march. If the author's sense of humor is eccentric, his sense of the theatre is no better.

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Under the direction of Elliott Nugent, "The Greatest Man Alive!" is sufficiently well-produced in stock-company style. Acting as scene designer, as well as principal producer, Frederick Fox has provided a cheerfully grubby tenement apartment. Among the other actors, take special note of Russell Collins. He plays a second old wack with temperament.

Given a professional script, Mr. King and Mr. Collins could put on quite a show. They are both solid troupers.

DAILY NEWS

May 9, 1957

'Greatest Man Alive,' a Farce, Is Funniest When It's Daffiest

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Greatest Man Alive," which brought Dennis King and Russell Collins to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last evening, is a daffy little farce which should succeed because of its utter amiability. But Broadway always demands more than it gets or deserves, and amiability alone is not a guarantee of success. Much as I enjoyed Tony Webster's play last night, I'm dubious about its future; screwball humor is relished only by screwballs and there aren't enough of us in the world to make it pay.

In "The Greatest Man Alive" King plays a character who, having lived for upward of 70 years, decides it is time to hang himself and to make a good show of it by wearing his derby. His necktie party is interrupted by a girl (the wholesomely attractive Kathleen Maguire) who is doing door-to-door research for a food manufacturer.

Delightful Fancies

The story is a slender one indeed, even though its author has fortified it with cops and television crews. It would be best to forget these trimmings and take for granted the obvious boy-loves-girl romance which is tossed in, and concentrate on the nonessentials of this play.

Some of these nonessentials are delightful. King, pondering a long life of failure as a lousy carpenter, relates that his parents wanted him to be a lawyer or a doctor. So he sat down to think about what he was going to be. "And when I got up," he finishes, "I was 65 years old."

This would-be suicide, King, is taken to Bellevue Hospital for six weeks of observation and the nutpickers down there turn him loose, obviously in despair. As King relates, they asked him what he was thinking about and he said "Nothing." That was a plain answer, but they riled him by asking, "What kind of nothing?"

It is only when "The Greatest Man Alive" gets down to essentials, like having to have three acts end a story, that it runs into practical difficulties. Elliott Nugent has directed the comedy with a greater appreciation for its loony moments than for its pace. King is completely and effortlessly charming as the lovable failure who thinks he is a great man, and Russell Collins is a grand companion as the friend who buys a bugle and learns to blow "Taps" so his old pal can have a fine suicide. And there is a nice performance by Biff McGuire as a young lawyer who has no difficulty in falling in love with Miss Maguire.

New York Post

May 9, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Man Who Wanted to Hang Himself

Are two theatrical works enough to indicate a trend? Or is sheer coincidence sufficient to explain it? Whichever it is, it strikes me as a fairly macabre phenomenon. For a couple of gentlemen writing for the stage have independently reached the conclusion that attempted suicide can be the subject of the gayest and most light-hearted laughter. The sight of would-be self-slaughter, they tell us, is not only a mirth-provoking spectacle, but a most endearing one.

In "Shinbone Alley," several weeks ago, the cockroach hero was especially whimsical when engaged in various suicidal endeavors. And, at the Ethel Barrymore Theater last night, where Tony Webster's "The Greatest Man Alive!" was having its first performance, Dennis King, playing a jaunty old fellow of 72, hummed a merry song, clapped a derby hat on his head at a rakish angle and gaily embarked on the jolly task of hanging himself, as his best friend applauded him with enthusiasm.

The Test

At the risk of being regarded by Mr. Webster as a sober spoilsport, I must express my doubt that the new comedy's premise is nearly as hilarious as he thinks it is. But I will grant that "The Greatest Man Alive!" doesn't really put it to a proper test. Even a topic for merriment that none would dispute would face awful difficulties in bearing up under the sort of laborious and ineffectual whimsy that the dramatist has written into this latest play with an exclamation-point title.

To give you a few more details, it appears that the old gentleman wants to die because he has attracted no attention in life. A failure despite his belief that he deserved better things, he is convinced that he will attract much favorable publicity in death if he is found hanging with that derby hat on his head. Unless you are overwhelmed with surprise and delight when you learn that he is kept from his plan by the unexpected arrival of a pretty girl, I won't recommend the play to you.

Not that there isn't a lot of activity of one kind or another on the stage. The police scurry about. Internes from Bellevue arrive. A television camera is presumably set up offstage to photograph the capture of two supposedly desperate old men. And, toward the end, an even more elaborate suicide is momentarily planned, replete with sparklers, bugle calls and martial phonograph records. Yet the result is merely another of those strange affairs that creep into the theater in the spring.

As usual, it isn't the actors who are at fault. Mr. King is as deft and debonair as ever in the role of the suicidal gentleman, and Russell Collins, an unfailingly skillful performer, is excellent as his loyal but occasionally irritated crony. Biff McGuire, as a sympathetic youth, again demonstrates what a talented and engaging young player he is, and Kathleen Maguire is pretty and charming as the girl. But the comedy has a lugubrious quality that doesn't stem entirely from its preoccupation with suicide.

New York Herald Tribune

May 9, 1957

THEATER

'The Greatest Man Alive!'

By WALTER KERR

THE best things in "The Greatest Man Alive" are impossible. Several of these exceedingly amiable high spots occur while Dennis King, playing a seventy-two-year-old total failure, is trying to hang himself from one of the lower rafters in his dingy E. 11th St. apartment.

• • •

In the first instance, Mr. King bobbles onto a silent stage to hum a few bright bars of "Camptown Races," run his fingers gleefully through his uncombed hair, and tiptoe expectantly to a battered bureau-drawer that contains a handy rope. By the time Mr. King has a noose strung up, and his head placed meticulously inside it, afterthoughts begin to come to him. He climbs jauntily down to make a few considerate additions to his suicide note, pauses to consult a dictionary so that the spelling will be worthy of him, and hesitates yet again to make sure that when his body is discovered his derby will still be placed at a suitably rakish angle.

• • •

The image isn't, on the face of it, an especially jolly one. And not a word of dialogue has been spoken to suggest what sort of play author Tony Webster has in mind. But in the fastidiousness of Mr. King's preparations, in the bounce of his walk and the haughty cunning of his eye, the tone of the enterprise has been perfectly and impudently set; however mocking or melancholy things may become during the evening, this is going to be a comedy and the old coot's death throes are going to be funny. They are funny.

They are funny all over again, quite a bit later, when Mr. King returns from a police raid, a spectacular television appearance, and a short stay at Bellevue to resume his task. This time he envisions a rather more colorful demise: it involves lowered lights, several blazing Fourth of July sparklers, and a loud brass band playing a military theme. It turns out that Mr. King can hang himself approximately as often as he likes without lowering the light comic mood or the innocent contentment of the enterprise.

• • •

Between suicides, playwright Webster has a few other engaging passes to make at the sort of behavior that is conventionally expected of the elderly. His general notion is that people don't like to die without having been, however briefly, "somebody." In the process of converting the absolutely "average" Mr. King into a front-page celebrity we are treated to a splendid moment during which fire sirens screech, doors are battered down, and guns are flipped wildly about, while the cause of all the commotion ecstatically inquiries: "Officer, what seems to be the trouble?" We are further regaled by discussions of psychoanalysis (doctors with glasses don't like to think that their patients are thinking of absolutely nothing at all), best-selling religious books (our author here is a Bishop, and utterly wretched about his declining sales), and the defiance the aged can bring themselves to ("I've decided not to adjust").

Mr. Webster has an amiable flair for outspoken nonsense, a friendly attitude toward raffish characters, and a shrewd sense of how far he can dip into incidental pathos without getting hopelessly wet. He is, above and beyond his own merits, very well served by Elliott Nugent's deft and gingerly direction, and by the performances of Russell Collins and Biff McGuire as a couple of neighbors who decide to stick around for any possible post mortems. Nor is there anything wrong with Kathleen Maguire in the underwritten role of a young lady who has come to test breakfast foods and stays to revise her notions about life, love, and marriage.

With so much in its favor, then does Mr. Webster's brave foray into the unlikely sail through to thundering success? Not quite. The improvisations are fun—but there isn't really any core to wrap them around. Once the premise about last-minute fame has been established, nothing much can be done but whistle the same little tune twice—or four or five times—over. The agreeable figures scamper about the stage looking for fresh inspiration, they try on some less good jokes for size ("If I can't kill myself successfully, life won't be worth living"), and they are left somewhat winded and helpless as the air goes out of the balloon with a small, regretful whistle. It's rather like a "Harvey" that has no rabbit to pull out of its hat.

But an encouraging try, nonetheless.

Journal American

May 9, 1957

A Wonderfully Mad Idea but It's Repetitious

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN "THE GREATEST MAY ALIVE!", a new comedy which opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last night, Dennis King comes onstage humming the refrain of a happy tune, takes a rope from a drawer, mounts a chair and goes through the preliminaries of hanging himself from a convenient archway in his apartment living room.

This ritual is repeated and interrupted at regular intervals throughout the evening; the phone rings, there is somebody at the door, and finally the whole city is alerted to this strange slice of drama unfolding in its midst. Mr. King is eager to get on with his self-destruction, but as public interest and his flair for publicity progress, he is distracted until the gendarmes lead him off to the Bellevue loony bin.

Here is a wonderfully mad and tenuous idea, unhappily too tenuous to sustain for the conventional evening in the theatre. We are captured by the prospect of a citizen who has blithely decided to erase himself, but we grow weary with the repetitions on the same theme, and with the dimly-devised sub plot involving the boy and girl.

Canvas a Bit Small

You see, a girl researcher stumbles into the middle of all this and meets a young law student. She takes an immediate dislike to him, for no reason, and so we know right away they are meant for each other. It requires three acts to get them squared away, and the denouement is neither ingenious nor convincing.

This, of course, is all secondary to the substance of the play which concerns Dennis King. The author, Tony Webster, probably hoped to create something of the fey atmosphere of "Arsenic and Old Lace"—an acceptance of death as a minor inconvenience—and with the enormous aid of both Mr. King and Russell Collins, he gives us many rewarding moments. But I'm afraid the canvas is a bit small for the frame. Despite the bright and sometimes profound pronouncements, our interest is not sustained by the premise which is pretty well wrapped up in the first act.

Hot or cold, Mr. King has never had such a field day. His is a gigantic part, and he plays it with forbearance and sympathy; nobody today can equal his impersonation of the seedy and whimsical philosopher, and this role is written to his talents.

Capable Acting

He is aided enormously by Mr. Collins, his "friend for 40 years," a fidgety and fractious operative who is in full agreement with his suicide pact. Then there are the capable contributions of Kathleen Maguire and Biff McGuire, as the boy and girl; John Gibson, as a Bishop who has written a less-selling book, and Richard Kelly, as the unsuccessful suitor.

Elliott Nugent directed the festivities, and I believe he brought forth all the hilarity and warmth the script provided. This is one of those very delicate and difficult fantasies, Mr. King and a group of people playing on a pink cloud. The trouble is, it is a rather small cloud to begin with, and they keep doing the same things.

I'm sorry, but I don't think "The Greatest Man Alive!" will live.

"A Moon for the Misbegotten"

DAILY NEWS

May 3, 1957

Wendy Hiller Is Magnificent in 'A Moon for the Misbegotten'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Another beautiful play by Eugene O'Neill, "A Moon for the Misbegotten," was presented at the Bijou Theatre last evening. In it, Wendy Hiller gave a performance of almost incredible magnificence. She, it struck me, is a great artist of our stage—an actress whose spiritual, vocal, physical and intellectual resources are more than equal to any demand that can be made of them.

The drama, another long one, does not have the organization or the impact of O'Neill's finest work, "Long Day's Journey Into Night," but nevertheless it is a compelling piece for the theatre. As directed by Carmen Capalbo, acted by Miss Hiller, Franchot Tone and Glenn Cannon, and set by William Pitkin, it is all in one splended piece. It has a unity that few stage productions ever achieve.

This is the last play O'Neill's quivering fingers could manage to put on paper. It was written in 1943 and it is an offshoot of the previously-written "Long Day's Journey." It concerns only one of the "four haunted Tyrones," James Tyrone Jr., who in a life which may not have been as real was Eugene's elder brother, James O'Neill Jr.

The Farmer's Daughter

But in "A Moon for the Misbegotten" James is not the principal character. He is a hard-drinking Broadway boy who comes to a poor Connecticut tenant farm and is not equal to the great strength and love of the farmer's daughter. Only when he has passed out from liquor on the farm porch in the light of this rueful moon can she hold him to her breast and claim him for her own. When dawn comes the moon is gone and so is he—and she is left with a new challenge to her dauntless spirit.

O'Neill envisioned this daughter of a besotted tenant farmer as a six-footer who could do the physical work of three men and be hard as nails emotionally. Not anybody would ever learn that she was just a girl, and a good one, who hungered for love.

Miss Hiller is not a big girl, nor is she a hard one, but she fills the stage of the Bijou as few contemporary actresses have managed to fill any stage. Her strength and her size are within her. This performance is a complete illusion, and only a very fine artist, aided by an exception-

"MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN"

Play in four acts by Eugene O'Neill; staged by Carmen Capalbo; designed by William Pitkin; lighting by Lee Watson; costumes by Ruth Morley; presented by Mr. Capalbo and Stanley Chase at the Bijou Theatre, May 2, 1957. The cast:

Josie Hogan.....Wendy Hiller
Mike Hogan.....Glenn Cannon
Phil Hogan.....Cyril Cusack
James Tyrone Jr...Franchot Tone
T. Stedman Harder.....
William Woodson

ally sensitive director, could play it.

A Bitter Story

Tone is excellent as the thrill-weary, liquor-weary Broadway-ite. In one long speech he tells the whole bitter story of his life, and it is admirably spoken and paced. Cusack, as Miss Hiller's no-account father, is picturesque, pathetic, dumbly sympathetic and altogether right for his role. Pitkin's setting of a beat-up old farmhouse is a fine illusion which helps make Miss Hiller look much bigger than she is.

"A Moon for the Misbegotten" is not the great play that "Long Day's Journey Into the Night" is. It is discursive and some of its phraseology—particularly the slang—is strangely dated and awkward. But it is a holding, moving drama, and it kept last evening's first-nighters spell-bound for more than three hours. And Miss Hiller makes one believe that O'Neill must have written the play just for her.

New York Herald Tribune

May 3, 1957

THEATER

Moon for Misbegotten

By WALTER KERR

IN Eugene O'Neill's "Moon for the Misbegotten" Wendy Hiller plays a rowdy, raucous, barefooted innocent who has long eaten her heart out for love of a shattered and forever drunken man. During the third act of the melancholy fantasia at the Bijou this proud and passionate virgin at last has her prize to herself for the night. She sits beside him on the battered back stairs of a deserted farmhouse, tentatively reaching out her hands in a caress. She flies at him in fury, scratching like a demon at a soul she cannot touch. At the last, she lets him fall helplessly into her arms to cry out the story of his own broken life, and to fall asleep like an infant born damned.

When it is over, she speaks simply, forlornly, and a little cynically of a miracle. She has become, she tells the sodden father who has just stumbled upon the two of them, "the virgin who bears a dead child in the night."

• • •

And this third act—of four—is indeed something of a miracle. For the first full half of the evening the company has rattled and blathered at the audience's eardrums without mercy, without melody, and—no little part of the time—without meaning.

Director Carmen Capalbo has apparently found no rhythms, no lights or shade, no relieving rests to give weight and life to O'Neill's opening movements. As father and daughter raise their fists to one another in rage at their private frustrations, the sounds of their anger clatter by with the run-on monotony of an endless express train. O'Neill has indulged himself in circuitous preparation, in insistently repeated epithets, before: these things recur just as frequently in "The Iceman Cometh" and "A Long Day's Journey into Night." This time they are raced so feverishly (as though no one had confidence they could be salvaged at all) and declaimed in so insistent a single key that O'Neill himself seems to have lost all sense of the theater.

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Then, rather late in the evening, the frantic mood subsides. Miss Hiller pauses and begins to look—longingly, furtively, desperately—at the shaken man beside her. Franchot Tone leans wearily against her arm, blinks in quiet scorn at the glowering orange stars above them, and mutters a lonely dirge about "the too many dawns that have crept over too many dirty windows."

Something human has happened. Two people are listening to each other, moving to cling to each other. With some solid earth beneath their feet, there is room now for emotion, a base for genuine violence. Mr. Tone seizes the opportunity to outline—with a savage and stinging vitality—the clash of motives that has drained him of his life and turned him into a ghost. Reeling away from the woman who wants to help him, he dredges up all the memories that terrify him most, scourging himself with self-hatred. Turning back to her, he confesses humbly and honestly to the remorse he has always felt. An exhausting internal tug-of-war is made chillingly plain. Mr. Tone is here, I think, giving us his best performance.

And the image of Miss Hiller—arms folded in a battle for self-control, head hunched low to keep her from betraying all that she feels, eyes alert to every move of the stumbling man near her—is one you won't soon forget, or want to. The futile coming-together of two condemned lovers builds to a climax that is almost musical in feeling, lyrical and lacerating in a single impulse.

The work of these two people in this third-act dance of death is superb, and should be seen. The rest of the play does not yet exist on the stage.

The New York Times

May 3, 1957

Theatre: 'O'Neill's Last

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO the two O'Neill plays already on the stages of this community add a third: "A Moon for the Misbegotten," which was magnificently acted at the Bijou last evening.

Although there is one more full-length O'Neill play not yet produced in New York, "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is the last play he wrote. He finished it in 1943. When it was acted on the road in 1947 it presented difficulties that could not be resolved. The current production, meticulously directed by Carmen Capalbo, suggests that no stage production can solve the problems.

For "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is a prolix, uneventful play that lacks the elemental power of an O'Neill drama. It is not so much an ascent into tragedy as a descent into squalor. Although the performance runs a few minutes longer than three hours, the characters are not worth such close inspection and the dramatic achievements are minor.

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"Long Day's Journey Into Night" is exclusively concerned with the maladies of the Tyrones. There is a Tyrone in "A Moon for the Misbegotten"—James Tyrone Jr., who represents O'Neill's brother. He is a drunken wastrel, haunted with memories of the binge he went on when, years ago, he was bringing his mother's body on the train from the West to the East for burial.

Lost in drink and dissipation, he is now looking for a mother substitute and finds one Josie Hogan, the unlovely but compassionate daughter of a wretched Irish farmer. She loves him and tries to convince herself that her love is returned. But Jim needs only maternal comfort from her. In the last act he leaves her with a happy feeling that he has respected her decency. But she is devastated by the realization that Jim does not want her as a woman.

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Most of the O'Neill dramas have an elemental strength that stiffens the structure and tautens the dialogue. By familiar standards they are overwritten, but they have compensating internal vitality. Except for a humorous first act, the vitality is low in "A Moon for the Misbegotten." The dialogue is rambling. The incidents are minor. The drinking is maudlin. In 1943 O'Neill was not in sufficiently good health to do his best work.

Thank Mr. Capalbo for realizing that even a minor O'Neill play deserves a beautiful production and an admirable performance. William Pitkin has filled the stage with a ramshackle house that has a bleak power of its own, especially in Lee Watson's sensitive lighting; and the costumes by Ruth Morley are a beggar's symphony of rags and tattered decency.

When Wendy Hiller was last here, she played a gentlewoman in "The Heiress," made from a Henry James work. It is the measure of her range as an actress that she is now giving a superb performance as a gawky, hulking, coarse, shrill farmgirl who nevertheless has an awareness and yearning for beauties beyond her reach. Miss Hiller manages to look careless and brutish and at the same time radiate a kind of wistful glory.

As her scheming, shiftless father who is all shanty guile, Cyril Cusack gives a tight-jawed, purse-lipped, immensely enjoyable performance that is comic in its swagger moments and pathetically crushed at the end. Franchot Tone, as the dissolute Tyrone, is at the top of his bent in character portraiture—the braggart on the surface, the lonely child at heart, the baffling mixture of good and bad impulses, a man doomed to kill the things he loves. There is an amusing sketch of a fatuous, rich neighbor by William Woodson, and an intelligible sketch of a pious Irish brother in a brief introductory scene.

Mr. Capalbo's production is full of loving respect for an eminent writer who has enriched the American theatre. But "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is only an echo of the major O'Neill dramas. In 1943 he did not have the vitality to lift it above the level of the characters. It is tired work.

New York Post

May 3, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Another Moving O'Neill Tragedy

"A Moon for the Misbegotten" is another of Eugene O'Neill's dark and brooding contemplations of tormented souls. The last work of our great dramatist, it suffers from his characteristic failings of excessive length and insufficient eloquence, but, whatever its incidental weaknesses may be, it is a moving, beautiful and shattering play. Admirably enacted by Wendy Hiller, Franchot Tone and Cyril Cusack, its first local performance at the Bijou Theater last night was a haunting emotional experience and one of the memorable events of recent theatrical seasons.

It is a remarkable tribute to a playwright when the only possible current rivals to one of his dramas are a couple ot his other works, and "A Moon for the Misbegotten" must inescapably be compared to "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Iceman Cometh." There is no way of avoiding, or reason for denying, that his final play is the least satisfying of the three. In it, their faults unquestionably bulk larger. But this has little to do with the fact that, after "A Moon for the Misbegotten" has managed its occasionally tedious beginning, it is overwhelming.

The Brother

The chief comparison, of course, must be to "Long Day's Journey," since one of the trio of central characters in the drama which opened last night is the James Tyrone Jr. who is the sad and dissolute older brother of the author in the autobiographical play. Here he is some years older and has been driven farther along his alcoholic path by the death of his mother. A bitter and deeply tormented man, who longs for his own death, he has fallen in love with a great hulk of a woman, but both of them realize that he is already a corpse and no romance is possible.

O'Neill plays have a manner of smoldering slowly and then bursting into dramatic flames, and here the smoldering takes much longer and the flames are less frequent. Once they have arrived, they are tremendous, but the unfortunate part of the periods of marking time between outbursts of fire is that they make the dramatist's known weakness, the inability of his prose style to rise to the heights of his imaginative lyric conceptions, too evident. So "A Moon for the Misbegotten" has its languors. They seem unimportant, though, when the high points are reached.

The Trio

Although there are two minor characters in the play, it is chiefly concerned with three figures, and they are studied with superb insight and compassion. They are, in addition to the doomed Tyrone, the giant of a woman, who pretends that she is a wanton because she wants to conceal her innocence and goodness, and her old Irish father, who is capable of any guile to protect his land and his daughter. Even O'Neill has written few more moving scenes than the climactic one between the girl and the drunken James, and it is unforgettable in its power and pity.

Wendy Hiller, who plays the girl, may not meet O'Neill's demands for physical bulk in the role, but she plays so beautifully that this soon becomes unimportant. Years after he deserved to be, Franchot Tone has come to be accepted as one of the ablest of American actors, but he has never been so brilliant as he is in the magnificent part of the lost alcoholic. And Cyril Cusack, one of the most talented of contemporary Irish actors, is splendid as the father. "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is further proof that Eugene O'Neill was one of the titans of the theater.

Journal-American

May 3, 1957

O'Neill Opus Long But Fiercely Great

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE POWER and the grandeur of Eugene O'Neill are again evident in "Moon For the Misbegotten," his last play, which was presented last night at the Bijou Theatre. Like "Long Day's Journey Into Night," to which this is at least a partial sequel, it has the same fierce qualities of introspection, the ruthless examination of forces and frustrations which pursued his tragic family to their separate graves.

Here he is concerned with the fate of his brother Jim, whose early problems with drink and dollies are intrinsic in the plot of "Journey." Now, with his mother dead, Jim seeks security at the breast of his tenant farmer's king-sized daughter; there is an evening of gentle magnificence, then they go their separate and inevitable ways.

With a gift superior to anybody writing our language today, O'Neill is able to bring poetry to this almost squalid consideration of Irish immigrants on a poor Connecticut farm. His scenes proceed endlessly—rising and falling, stopping short and starting all over again, sometimes trailing off into trivialities. But he never loses control or understanding of his characters, or of their importance.

It seemed to me that much of the three-hour drama might not have suffered by adroit deletion, but the general effect depends upon its very verbosity, the creation of a mood, and it would be difficult and dangerous to select the point of incision. Certainly there are moments in the first act that could be condensed, but from there onward the overpowering progression of the play, however long-winded, is justified.

Mr. O'Neill in describing his heroine, the farmer's daughter, had indicated that she be a female behemoth, weighing "around 180 pounds." Wendy Hiller, who plays the part, carries no such weight but by force of sheer animal vigor and some ingenious pads is able to create the desired effect. She gives one of the memorable performances of her career—tender, earthy and primitively proud.

Tone Brilliant

Cyril Cusack, an Abbey Theatre alumnus making his Broadway bow, is superb in the role of the Irish father—the sad, scheming inebriate, whose last links with life are his farm and his daughter.

Franchot Tone, as James Tyrone Jr., turns in an assured and brilliant portrayal of the alcoholic brother who is lost in the torment of his weakness at the time of his mother's death. Reclining in Miss Hiller's arms, he has one of the longest expositional speeches in recent history, and he does it wonderfully well. Glenn Cannon has a brief moment, and a good one, as one of Mr. Cusack's fugitive children, and William Woodson is a properly stuffy landowner.

I thought Carmen Capalbo's direction was always forthright and never intrusive, and the stark premises of a Connecticut farm, as designed by William Pitkin, were excellent.

There will be those who will find "Moon" over-length and under-clear. But not me. I am an O'Neill fan, and I think it's just great.

New York World-Telegram
and
The ~~Herald~~ Sun

May 3, 1957

A Long Night's Moongazing

By TOM DONNELLY.

I assume that everyone who is seriously interested in the American theater will want to see Eugene O'Neill's last completed work, "A Moon for the Misbegotten" (at the Bijou). The serious theatergoer is warned: seeing it must be largely a labor of love.

"A Moon for the misbegotten" is in its essentials a slight story, and there is a great disproportion between the content of it and the telling of it. James Tyrone Jr., who was modeled on O'Neill's older brother, and who appears with the shadow of doom already upon him in "Long Day's Journey Into Night," turns up again, older, more dissipated, all but destroyed.

In the climactic scene of the play Tyrone has a moment of truth. He has been indulging himself in cruel jokes, and "picking out the weakness in people" and sneering at them, but at last he reveals himself to Josie Hogan, the strapping daughter of a Connecticut tenant farmer. During the final two years of his mother's life Tyrone was her loyal and affectionate support. He stayed on the wagon for two years, not even a glass of beer. But just before his mother died she saw her son drunk again, unable to face losing her. "She closed her eyes so she couldn't see, and was glad to die."

Train Pickup.

And after that, when Tyrone brought his mother's body East, "to be buried beside the Old Man," he picked up a "50 buck a night blonde" on the very funeral train. He had "some mad idea she could make me forget—what was in the baggage car ahead."

Josie downs her momentary feeling of revulsion. She loves Tyrone, and she has been presenting a false face to the world herself. Josie has been posing as a wanton. She has made herself the scandal of the neighborhood. But profane, ungainly Josie is an innocent, a softly feminine spirit trapped in a gross body. After his confession Tyrone falls asleep in her arms, chastely, on the shabby porch of the farmhouse. Josie knows that she cannot save Tyrone. "It's a fine end to all my scheming," she says, with a self-derisive smile, "to sit here with the dead hugged to my breast, and the silly mug of the moon grinning down, enjoying the joke!"

That is O'Neill's real story, simple, almost fragile, and enhanced by an awkward, driving compassion that has the feeling of poetry, even though the words lack the harmony of poetry. What he wants to say, O'Neill gets said, but in the process he comes close to smothering his deepest intention in a massive overlay of tedium. There is nothing in "A Moon for the Misbegotten" that calls for the epic, longer-than-three-hours treatment. Something small, with genuine quality, has been inflated and ornamented into something that is bulkily pretentious, or nearly that.

For long stretches at a time, as the central characters stand before their Connecticut farmhouse, the illusion that we are looking at tormented creatures of flesh and blood vanishes, and we see and hear only so many talking machines, whirring away against a painted background.

Recognizable Sketch.

Surprisingly, it is well along in the evening, when he emerges as a recognizable later sketch of the man we have seen in "Long Day's Journey Into Night," that James Tyrone takes on any kind of theatrical or human dimension. Until then he is a shadowy figure, and it is hard to work up any interest in him. Part of the trouble is in performance. Franchot Tone is excellent in those final scenes. Earlier, he intensifies Tyrone's dullness, doing considerable damage to the hoped-for effect of a bitterly merry rogue ultimately unmasking.

Josie Hogan is another matter. She is the one big-scale portrait in the gallery, painfully, throbbingly, hopelessly alive. Wendy Hiller plays her with magnificent skill, and with great tenderness. A remarkable job of acting.

As Josie's father, the scheming and ferociously humorous Phil Hogan, Cyril Cusack is brilliant.

Daily Mirror

May 3, 1957

JUSTIN GILBERT'S DRAMA REVIEW

O'Neill Play Grim, Uneven Work

Perhaps one of the words in the title of the last play Eugene O'Neill wrote serves as the best clue to the kind of people who appear in it. The word is "misbegotten." The title of his drama which made its initial appearance here last night at the Bijou, is "A Moon for the Misbegotten."

Webster defines misbegotten as "unlawfully begotten; illegitimate"—but it would seem that O'Neill's connotation implied wretchedness or bedevilment. For, with the exception of one principal, all of the people in this miasmic production are breast-beaters.

O'NEILL KICKED some of Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road" characters up north for this 1943 labor. We find a slop-stained, bewhiskered old Irish tenant farmer and his heavy-bodied, bellowing daughter in a ramshackle Connecticut house, surrounded by pigs and rocks.

The daughter, Josie (Wendy Hiller) is the female equivalent of a dock walloper. When her dirty dad, Phil Hogan (Cyril Cusack) tangles with her, she threatens him with a club. She's proud she's a slut, she keeps repeating—and the old man champions her claims.

But both are disturbed because she's been smitten by a dissolute neighbor, James Tyrone, Jr. (Franchot Tone) who, like Dorian Gray, is an effete fop who has piled sin on sin with Broadway tarts until he's a walking monument to vice.

He's a strange fish: boozer, reciter of poetry, philopornist and admirer of Josie. She loves him for himself, but Old Man Hogan realizes Tyrone owns the land they live on, and may yet sell it to some one.

THERE'S ONE WAY to prevent that, thinks the father. Use the daughter as bait.

He tells her Tyrone has sold the place to a hated neighbor and encourages her to seduce him so they can work the badger game on him.

Up to this point, there is enough gritty dialogue to convey the feeling that these Hogans are real peatbog wallowers.

But when the girl gets the wastrel lover in her arms, you'd swear he was Heathcliff come marching through the heather.

There's the rub. The play is alternately grubby, funny, grim and poetic. Such abrupt changes contribute to its uneveness.

ITS STAR IS CUSACK as the slovenly father. A former Irish Abbey player, he is magnificent. Miss Hiller, in her first Broadway role in years, is effective—but her physique lacks the dimension envisioned by O'Neill.

Tone is just satisfactory as Tyrone (said to be O'Neill's drunken brother) given to too much eye-rolling.

A moon is neecssary to these misbegotten folk. They're a motley, dark-souled group, over whom O'Neill's incandescence barely flickers here and there.

(Robert Coleman was unable to cover this opening because of illness.)

"Livin' the Life"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 29, 1957

THEATER

'Livin' the Life'

By WALTER KERR

WHEN Becky Thatcher walks out on Tom Sawyer toward the end of the first act of the new show at the Phoenix, Tom strides forward to the footlights, clenches his fists, screws up his eyes, and shouts out his very first "Damn!" It seemed to me that the word was a long time coming to him. It had been on my lips for a good hour before that.

For the rumor that Mark Twain's Mississippi River stories had been turned into a musical comedy was, like certain other rumors about Mr. Twain, exaggerated. No one, with the possible exception of designers William and Jean Eckart, has come even close.

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Certain loose gestures have been made in the direction of finding lively and lyrical statements for the romantic daydreams and thrashing nightmares of Tom and Huck and Jim and Injun Joe. A dancer, Timmy Everett by name, has been asked to do athletic handstands on fence-posts, frightened dives over his bedstead, and various leaps and bounds among the green and purple stalactites of MacDougal's Cave. He is, so far as I could see, a good dancer; certainly he earned my admiration during a little hop, skip and jump with Becky before the curtain. But he is not a singer, as he is often asked to be. And he is not—I'll write it in blood—Tom Sawyer.

Tom and Huck, in this feeble and faraway reincarnation, are a couple of standard musical comedy kids, plentifully equipped with painted freckles and ragged shocks of blonde and red hair, quick to flash routine smiles on any old cue and apparently incapable of believing—or of making you believe—a single yowl or yipe or adolescent groan that comes out of them.

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I'm not at all certain that the fault lies entirely with the libretto that Dale Wasserman and Bruce Geller have partly borrowed from Twain and partly invented for themselves, or even with the somewhat nervous and fragmentary score that Jack Urbont has dropped on the levee. Once in awhile there is an interesting suggestion of irony (a condemned man inviting minstrels to celebrate beneath his jailhouse window) or a catchy tune ("Probably in Love," with Tom flipping all over the place and defying you to catch it).

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What really lets the proceedings fall smack through the Phoenix floor, I think, is the production that David Alexander has directed and composer Urbont has supervised musically. The casting has been so arranged that almost no principal can sing: only Alice Ghostly's Aunt Polly and Lee Charles' Jim permit a trace of music to filter out front—and Jim has only two fleeting moments.

When the ensemble marches out in crinolines and stovepipe hats, nary a lyric can be heard through the distant vocal thrashing. When the boys and girls of Hannibal, Missouri, collect before the village pump to engage in mock battle, the ensuing choreography is not only arch and irrelevant (the Queen of Sheba is carried in with a bucket on each foot) but fuzzily executed. Instead of honoring the materials on their own terms and doing a straight-forward ballad-musical, an attempt has been made at conventional razzle-dazzle—and the razzle-dazzle itself has then been limply managed.

Exceptions must be made. In the second act, dance director John Butler has finally succeeded in creating a rollicking stage picture and a resounding noise with a "Supersational Day" done in cakewalk. He has, too, some inventive and attractive ideas for a nightmare ballet (James Mitchell, as Injun Joe, spearing three pirates with a single swoosh of his blade, or the pert and stylish Lee Becker, as Joan of Arc, being wrapped like a mummy in her own flowing cloak); though, once again, the over-all shape of the episode is uncertain and shaggy.

"LIVIN' THE LIFE"

Musical in two acts based on Mark Twain's Mississippi River stories, book by Dale Wasserman and Bruce Geller; lyrics by Mr. Geller; music by Jack Urbont; staged by David Alexander; choreography by John Butler; settings by Klaus Holm; costumes by Alvin Colt; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, April 27, 1957. The cast:

Marshall Rogers..Francis Barnard
Judge Thatcher.....Jack DeLon
Mr. Dobbins.....Earl Hammond
Capt. Mumford...Dean Michener
Emmy Harper...Marijane Maricle
Muff Potter.....Stephen Elliott
Jim.....Lee Charles
Doc Robinson...Ronald Rogers
Aunt Polly.....Alice Ghostley
Injun Joe.....James Mitchell
Huckleberry Finn...Richard Ide
Tom Sawyer....Timmy Everett
Becky Thatcher... Patsy Bruder
Amy Lawrence.....Lee Becker
Alfred Noble...Loren Hightower
Joe Harper.....Tom Hasson
Ben Rogers.....Kevin Carlisle
Jeff Hollis.....George Liker
Bill Anders....Edward Villella
Susy Harper.....Joan Bowman
Mary Austin.....Julie Oser
Gracie Miller..Rettadel Tupper

And, as has been intimated earlier, the shiny autumn trees and bright red-and-white churches of the Eckarts are stunning.

But "Livin' the Life" is a misnomer. Life on the Mississippi was earthier—and a lot gayer—than this.

The New York Times
April 29, 1957

Theatre: 'Livin' the Life'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH "Livin' the Life" is based on the Mississippi River stories of Mark Twain, the civilizing influences of the Eastern seaboard are noticeable. The production, which opened at the Phoenix on Saturday evening, is cute. Dale Wasserman and Bruce Geller have made a clever musical romp out of folklore.

There is some of "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn" in it the murder in the graveyard, the trial in court, Tom Sawyer's macabre nightmare, his sticky flirtation with the coquette from Baton Rouge, the wild antics of Injun Joe, the picnic in the caves, a glimpse or two of the wharf at Hannibal, Mo.

But don't expect a literal report of Twain's two stories of boys in a fabulous part of the country at a fabulous time, nor many of his recollections of steamboating on the Mississippi. For the two authors, Jack Urbont, who is the composer, and John Butler, who is the choreographer, have in mind an impressionistic sketch of some formless though pungent classics of America.

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Oddly enough, the adults come out of it better than the boys. That may be because Aunt Polly, Muff Potter and Injun Joe are acted by the ablest people in the company—Alice Ghostley, Stephen Elliott and James Mitchell, respectively. Amid the coyness of the general performance, Miss Ghostley's personal candor and wonderfully open singing voice are stabilizing influences. Mr. Elliott plays the part of the drunken pilot with homely honesty. And Mr. Mitchell's cunning, nervous Indian is baleful and concise. In the ballet of Tom Sawyer's nightmare, Mr. Mitchell's dancing is superb.

But Timmy Everett patronizes Tom Sawyer with breathless affectations, and Richard Ide has only the most elementary notions about the rebel inside Huckleberry Finn. Be grateful, therefore, for the tom-girl gauchery of Lee Becker as Amy Lawrence, and for the self-conscious, adolescent bridling of Patsy Bruder as the flirt from down river.

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Working on an austere budget, the designers have accomplished more than the writers. William and Jean Eckart have provided scenery that catches the pleasant simplicity of the town, the fecundity of the river flora and the black mystery of the caves. As usual, Klaus Holm has made the lighting eloquent. Alvin Colt's costumes have a nostalgic loveliness that also recaptures the innocence of a lost American era.

A lot of hard work is devoted to a musical show of this kind, and nobody wants to be lacking in appreciation of good intentions. But it seems to this department that the music, most of the dancing, most of the writing and most of the acting lack the earthiness of Mark Twain.

He was an independent citizen who cussed, smoked, told vulgar stories, gambled and behaved indecorously. The culture he represented in the Hannibal of his day was solid and plain. But Mr. Urbont's music is thin and diffuse. (Think of the Jerome Kern score for "Show Boat." Apart from being beautiful it got inside the minds of the characters.) With the exception of the nightmare ballet with its concrete symbols, Mr. Butler's choreography is hardly more than a facetious attitude.

They are not "Livin' the Life" of Mark Twain. They are "Livin' the Life" of dabblers in the performing arts.

New York Post

April 29, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

Musical Play Based on Mark Twain

If the score and lyrics were more enlivening, the libretto defter and less sketchy, and some of the performers more interesting, "Livin' the Life" might have been the fresh and charming entertainment it so often seems on the verge of being. Since these are fairly important lapses, however, my impression is that the commendable ambition of Dale Wasserman, Bruce Geller and Jack Urbont to make Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer" the basis of an intimate little musical play, which was presented for the first time at the Phoenix Theater Saturday night, doesn't quite work out.

It seems all the more a shame because some of the evening's details come off so pleasantly. This is particularly true in the case of the settings by William and Jean Eckart, which are simple, modest and imaginative, and of the choreography by John Butler. Mr. Butler has staged a minstrel number that is gay and invigorating, and several others that are excellent, but his chief triumph is a nightmare ballet, in which Tom dreams that he is being pursued by Injun Joe and inadequately protected by his schoolmates, and it possesses comic imagination of a delightful disorder.

Injun Joe

Furthermore, there is a pleasant air of informality about the production, which, when it doesn't go too far in that respect, gives it a disarmingly likable atmosphere. And several of the performers are everything they should be. James Mitchell has a fine, saturnine quality that equips him perfectly for the role of the sinister Injun Joe, and, as you may recall from the original presentation of "Brigadoon," he is an admirable dancer, who is wonderfully fearsome in the nightmare ballet. In the small role of the girl Tom jilts for Becky Thatcher, Lee Becker is just right.

But it seemed to me that the becoming informality of "Livin' the Life" too often drifts into something close to mediocrity. None of Mr. Urbont's songs, save possibly "Late Love," is especially attractive on first hearing, and the dramatic narrative, although it improves considerably in the second half, is remarkably ineffectual to come from so classic a source as Twain's enchanting epic of youth. Even the trial scene, where Tom is shown as coming unwillingly to testify against Injun Joe, fails to take advantage of its potentialities of suspense.

Tom and Huck

This, in the end, is what strikes me as wrong with the new musical play. Too rarely do its potentialities become anything more than that, and "Livin' the Life" is the victim of its own inability to be quite good enough. Take as an example Timmy Everett and Richard Ide, who are, respectively, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. They have the proper youth and ingenuousness, and the latter is visually almost ideal for his role, but they are disappointing because both the youth and the ingenuousness somehow appear just a little too arch and self-conscious.

Stephen Elliott, always a competent actor, has his effective moments as an alcoholic Mississippi pilot falsely accused of murder, but even he is not quite as convincing as usual, and Alice Ghostley hardly scores as strikingly as is her custom in the role of Tom's Aunt Polly. Nor does it seem to me that Patsy Bruder, looking surprisingly like a teenage Margaret Truman, has the proper quality for Becky, the town dream girl. There is intermittent charm in "Livin' the Life," and the nightmare ballet is a pleasure, but the final effect is a let-down.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

April 29, 1957

Aunt Polly Finds Love, Loses Me

By TOM DONNELLY.

Remember Aunt Polly? The old lady who was always calling Tom Sawyer, and looking for him over and above her spectacles? Never THROUGH them, because they were built for "style," and she "could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well."

The authors of "Livin' the Life," the new musical at the Phoenix based on "Mark Twain's Mississippi River Stories," have been looking at their source material through a pair of stove-lids. How Aunt Polly has changed! She's a very much younger lady now, and madly in love with Muff Potter, an amiable drunk with a lot of good in him.

"Livin' the Life" asks a heap of questions Mark Twain never dreamed of. Will Muff reform? Will Aunt Polly land her man? Will Tom Sawyer tell the court it was really Injun Joe, not Muff, who did that murder in the graveyard, so Aunt Polly and Muff can make beautiful music together?

Made of Greasepaint.

Speaking of beautiful music, there isn't any in "Livin' the Life."

There are lots of other things. There's a Tom Sawyer with a big marshmallow smile and a habit of mugging in a manner that is pretty familiar around Broadway and Hollywood, but I'll bet you my bottom dollar was unknown in the Hannibal, Mo. of 1850.

There's a Huckleberry Finn carved out of greasepaint. I can't believe either of those boys on the Phoenix stage would have the least notion which end of a fishing pole to put the worm on.

There's the scene where Muff Potter is about to go to trial. Well, it's apparently minstrel day in Hannibal, because smack in the middle of the proceedings a minstrel troupe comes out and does a big number. I haven't seen anything like it since they combined the regular Saturday afternoon hoedown with the trial of Lizzie Borden in "New Faces." Except that time they were being satiric.

Nightmare Ballet.

I guess if you look hard enough you can find an acceptable apple in almost any barrel, and there are a few items in the extravaganza at the Phoenix that are passable, or better. Tom has a nightmare in the form of a ballet. Injun Joe chases him with knives, and all of Tom's friends come forth to help him.

James Mitchell does nicely by Injun Joe's dancing moments, and in the course of the evening Lee Becker makes a peppery and amusing tomboy out of Amy. Patsy Bruder simpers enthusiastically as Becky, without being offensive about it.

Alice Ghostley is a great favorite of mine, but I certainly wish she had never tackled the role of Aunt Polly, or agreed to sing a dreary ballad titled "Late Love." Miss Ghostley is licked from the moment the curtain goes up.

When he is allowed to, Lee Charles makes a good impression as Jim, but he isn't allowed to very often. Timmy Everett and Richard Ide are supposed to be Tom and Huck, and let's not say another word about them. "Livin' the Life" was written by Dale Wasserman and Bruce Geller. Mr. Geller did the lyrics, and Jack Urbont owns up to the music. The choreography is by John Butler.

Journal-American
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'Livin' the Life' A Thin Play of Twain Stories

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE genesis of "Livin' The Life," a new musical which was presented at the Phoenix Theatre Saturday night, is involved with the lovely, nostalgic days of youth as portrayed in so many of Mark Twain's stories of the Mississippi River. The people are all there: Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Aunt Polly, Injun Joe, Muff Potter, Becky Thatcher and Amy Lawrence. The effort has been made to stir them all together in a sort of barefoot stew, but somehow it never quite simmers.

The plot deals with Aunt Polly's unrequited love for Muff Potter, a great river pilot who has drunk himself into disgrace. There is the graveyard scene, in which Tom and Huck see a murder committed, then pledge themselves never to squeal; but when poor Muff is about to be sentenced for a crime he didn't commit *natcherly* Tom comes to the rescue and saves him for Aunt Polly.

There is, of course, the subordinate situation dealing with Tom's callow dilemma, as he is torn between Becky and Amy. It is a quite happy melange of many Mark Twain characters and episodes, and something approaching a valuable mood is achieved, but in sum it doesn't score solidly.

In my opinion this is due to the fact that we are never made to feel enough interest either in Aunt Polly's plight or the juvenile frustrations of Tom. Neither the music nor lyrics give us too much aid in this department, and with the exception of Lee Charles, playing the part of Jim, there is not a notable singer in the cast. It is actually, a rather thin play which is not improved by the addition of music. Not this music, anyway.

Three exceptions must be made to this dour report: there is a first class ballad sung by Alice Ghostley called, "Late Love"; there is a wonderfully inventive ballet, a crazy concept of Tom's nightmare when he is being stalked by Injun Joe, and there is a good number called "Jim's Lament," sung by Lee Charles. Obviously there are sprightly dance numbers here and there and some pleasant individual bits but, again, the proceedings are preponderantly pedestrian.

Settings Brilliant

In the cast Stephen Elliott is an engaging Muff Potter; Alice Ghostley, as Aunt Polly, has scant opportunity to exhibit her fine talents for comedy; James Mitchell is properly sinister and solemn as Injun Joe; both Lee Becker and Patsy Bruder are effective as the girls in Tom's life, and Timmy Everett is an appealing Tom Sawyer.

The settings by William and Jean Eckart are ingenious and brilliant, many of them moved into place unobtrusively while the action proceeds. David Alexander, in charge of the over-all direction, has done a well-paced job, and John Butler's choreography is off-beat and original.

Many efforts have been made through the years to capture the drowsy, homespun quality of youth on the Big Muddy, the gloriously irresponsible years so well recalled by Mark Twain — but none have succeeded.

Unhappily, "Livin' The Life" is no exception.

DAILY NEWS
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'Livin' the Life,' a Musical 'Tom Sawyer,' Is Best While Dancing

By DOUGLAS WATT

A peculiar talent is needed to make the wonderfully untidy "Adventures of Tom Sawyer" conform to the pattern of the routine Broadway musical. Mark Twain didn't have it. But the people responsible for "Livin' the Life," which opened Saturday night at the Phoenix Theatre, are made of sterner stuff.

Unhappily, it isn't a very good show even on these terms. The songs are commonplace, both lyrically and musically, and since there are quite a few of them "Livin' the Life" comes to a dead stop with monotonous regularity.

Best While Dancing

Thank heavens for the dances, though. John Butler, who devised them, has taken a properly impish attitude toward the townspeople of Hannibal, Mo., and when he has them join in a mock battle and an impromptu cakewalk life perks up along the Mississippi. And in the evening's high spot, a hilarious nightmare ballet in which Injun Joe is forced to vanquish the noble warriors of Tom's imagination, we sense some of the possibilities in a musical "Sawyer."

For present purposes, Muff Potter, the old town drunk, has been transformed into a handsome riverboat pilot who is trying to drown his memory of a river accident in drink. And Tom's Aunt Polly has become an attractive woman of early middle age who loves Potter and eventually gets her man. These parts are played as well as circumstances permit by Alice Ghostley and Stephen Elliott. Miss Ghostley, incidentally, is one of the few principals capable of singing a song. Lee Charles, who plays a grown-up edition of Tom's Negro friend, Jim, is another.

Dancing Tom

Casting a ballet dancer, Timmy Everett, in the part of Tom doesn't strike me as being an entirely happy notion but, all things considered, young Everett acquits himself fairly well. Richard Ide, a somewhat mature type, tags along as Tom's unregenerate pal, Huck Finn. James Mitchell, I thought, made a dashing Injun Joe despite the fact that he reminded me more of Jigger Craigin in "Carousel" than the sinister half-breed of Twain's work. Patsy Bruder is a lovely Becky Thatcher. And a delightful dancer, whose name I am unable to identify in the program, impersonated the Queen of Sheba in Tom's dream and led the cakewalk.

The Eckarts, William and Jean, have put together a lot of fine scenery, including some whimsical stalactites and stalagmites for the cave scene, and Alvin Colt's costumes make mid-19th Century Hannibal citizens a colorful and often handsome lot. The skilful orchestrations by Hershey Kay and Joe Glover occasionally make the score sound better than it is and conductor Anton Coppola keeps the pit musicians playing it with conviction. David Alexander, the over-all director, has things moving briskly between songs.